

1971

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THE KEYBOARD SUITES
OF JOHANN SEBASTIAN BACH

by

Karen Shank

A Research Project
for the Honors Program

of

Ouachita Baptist University

May 7, 1971

THE KEYBOARD SUITES
OF JOHANN SEBASTIAN BACH

The suite developed over a period of years in several European countries. At first suites were simply collections of songs performed together. The form gradually stabilized to contain the specific dances now included, although the order of the dances varied. The dance forms used came from such countries as England, France, Germany, Italy and Spain. Composers in France and Italy had written suites before Bach did, but he perfected the form. In all, Bach wrote thirteen suites for the harpsichord: six French Suites, six English Suites, six Partitas, and the Overture in the French Manner.

The suite is a musical form composed of several dance-like movements which are related by key. There are four standard movements in Bach's suites: the Allemande, Courante or Corrente, Sarabande, and Gigue. Optional dances are generally included between the Sarabande and Gigue. In this form the movements are all in the same key with only a few exceptions.

The form of the four standard movements is binary. There are two sections in each dance, each of which is repeated. In the first section there is a modulation from the tonic key to either the dominant or the relative major key of a minor tonic. The second section begins in the related key and modulates back to the tonic. The optional group of dances may or may not be in this form, although they are in the tonic key.

The Allemande is of German origin. It is always in 4-4 time with a sixteenth note upbeat. Its movement is steady and moderately slow.

There is no melody as such, however there are rhythmic passages developed contrapuntally among the different voices. Bach adhered strictly to these formal requirements for the Allemande, and yet he developed its musical possibilities fully. The Allemandes in the Partitas are much more elaborate than those in the French Suites.

The dance which immediately succeeds the Allemande and which is intended to contrast it has two spellings because it has two origins. The Italian version is the Corrente. This dance is in a quick 3-4 or 3-8 time. It is full of rapid passages of direct, simple rhythmic movement. The Courante, however, originated ⁱⁿ France. Its rhythmic qualities are more complex because there are continual shifts from 3-2 to 6-4 throughout. Hemiola, the rhythmic device of changing from three beats to two beats in a bar or vice versa, always occurs at the end of both sections in the Courante. The instability of the meter in this dance definitely provides a contrast to the smoothly flowing quality of the Allemande. Both the Courante and Corrente always begin with a sixteenth note upbeat. In addition, they possess the similar characteristic of having freely moving parts in every voice.

The Sarabande, of Spanish origin, provides an obvious contrast to the contrapuntal styles of the previous two dances. Its tempo is much slower and more deliberate. Its harmony is usually homophonic rather than polyphonic. In addition, there is a marked emphasis on the second beat in a measure of three beats. The character of the Sarabande appears serious when it is compared to the motion of the Allemande and Courante, and also to the gaiety of the optional dances and Gigue to follow.

England contributed the Gigue to the suite dances. It is a light, rapidly moving piece written in triple meter. In Bach's suites the first

half is always a free fugue with the second half being a free inversion of the fugal subject.

The four main dances composing the nucleus of the suite resemble a large triple form as might be found in a symphony. The Allemande and Courante viewed together create the opening statement. The Sarabande occupies the position of the slow movement whereas the Gigue and optional dances comprise the concluding fast movement.

As already mentioned, optional dances were included with the four standard dances. Not all are ever included in one, but two movements or more are found in every suite.

One of the most frequently used dances is the Minuet, a French court dance characterized by its nobility and gracefulness. In 3-4 time, the Minuet used to be composed in two eight-measure phrases, each of which was repeated. However, that limited form has long since been expanded. To complement the short, original length, a second Minuet was often composed to be played immediately after the first. This was written in three parts only, moreover, and thus was named "Trio." The term Trio now refers to simply the second part of a Minuet form, since that part is no longer limited to three voices. After the Trio the Minuet is re-played without repeats. It is an interesting fact that Bach never used the word "trio" except to designate a formally accurate Trio; one written in three voices.

Another frequently included dance in the suites is the Gavotte, originally a Scottish dance but which was adopted by the French people. Moving quickly, but moderately in common time, Bach's Gavottes are in the usual binary form. They usually begin on the third beat of the measure. Often a second Gavotte follows the first, serving as a Trio.

Sometimes the second Gavotte is really a Musette. A Musette is a pastoral air similar in style to the Gavotte, but different in that it has a drone bass or a pedal bass. The upper part is ornamented. The Musette got its name from the bagpipe which is called "musette." Since bagpipes played music which contained drone bases and ornamented melodies, it is appropriate that the dance by its name should have that similar characteristic.

The Lourè is also connected with the old bagpipes. Originally the word "lourè" meant bagpipe. After awhile the term was applied to any passage which was to be played in the style of the old bagpipe airs. The Lourè is usually in 6-4 time and is played a little slower than the Gigue.

The Bourrée is a French dance in common time (alla breve). The tempo is faster in this dance than in the Gavotte because it has two beats to a measure while the Gavotte has four. Not infrequently, a second Bourrée serves as a Trio to the first one.

The Aria and three Airs in Bach's suites resemble vocal melodies with accompaniments rather than dance types. They provide a contrast to the dances, and as such are twice (in the Partitas) placed, not with the optional groups, but before the Sarabande. The Aria is more instrumental than are the Airs.

Adapted from the original English version, the Passepié is a French street dance. Beginning on the last beat of the measure, its motion is quite rapid. In Bach's suites it is in the usual binary form with repeats.

Although they are included with the group of optional dances, the Burlesca, Rondeau, Scherzo and Capriccio are not really dance forms. The Burlesca has been defined as "a musical jest or playful composition."

Scherzo seems to indicate merely the lightly humorous style of the movement by that name. Rondeau is the French variation of the Italian Rondo. Thus, the Rondeau in the second Partita is simply in Rondo form. It has a main theme which recurs after every new theme to form a rounded whole. The Capriccio in the same Partita concludes this suite rather than a Gigue. Therefore, it has been suggested by Joseph Spitta that the term "capriccio" indicates that this composition is a simple fancy of Bach's mind. In any respect, it is indicative of the rather playful character of this movement.

The six French Suites are the earliest Bach wrote. The title "French" was added to the set after Bach's death to distinguish them from the English Suites and Partitas. Beyond this there is no indication that Bach was trying to imitate any particular French characteristics. These suites contain the fewest number of optional dances, and they have no introductory movements to the Allemandes as do both the Partitas and English Suites. The overall character of this collection is simple and uninvolved. They are in the keys of D minor, C minor, B minor, E-flat major, G major, and E major.

The Gigue in the D minor suite is unusual because it is in common time rather than in three, and it moves slowly and ponderously instead of quickly. This suite has two Minuets as optional dances. An unusual exception to the rule occurs here: the second half of the second Minuet is not repeated. Courantes are present in the first and third suites, while the rest have Italian Correntes. The Minuet in the second suite has no Trio, whereas in the third suite (B minor) there is a Minuet I with a formally strict Trio following it. The fourth suite also contains a Minuet written in two eight-bar phrases as the original early Minuets were.

The sixth suite also has a Minuet without a Trio. The Airs in the second and fourth suites may be placed with the optional dances rather than before the Sarabande, because in these earliest suites Bach followed very strict forms. Later he varied a little. The other optional dances in the French Suites are an Anglaise, a simple, country dance; Gavottes, most without Trios; two Bourrées; a Polonaise, which is a stately court dance from Poland; and the one example of the Loure found in the fifth suite in this set.

The English Suites were given their name again for identification purposes, and not by Bach himself as any referral to their characters. Bach adhered strictly to the form of the suite, but to this set he gave rich, strong characters. He added more optional dances and expanded the standard ones. They are in the keys of A major, A minor, G minor, F major, E minor, and D minor.

Each English Suite has an introductory prelude. With the exception of the A major Prelude, they are in large, elaborate forms. The A minor Prelude is an expanded ABA or Aria form, whereas the G minor and F major Preludes are in concerto grosso form. The E minor is a rapid, powerful fugue as is the D minor Prelude. However, this last one is preceded by series of broken chords which is very characteristic of the free style of preludes.

In the A major suite Bach has two Courantes (in the English Suites all are Courantes), the second of which has two Doubles or Variations following it. The second and third suites contain ornamentations of the Sarabandes after the regular Sarabande.

Each English Suite contains two optional dances apiece. The second one always serves the first as a Trio. The second dance, in addition,

is always in either the parallel or relative major or minor key to the first. The A major suite has Bourrée I in A major and Bourrée II in A minor. The A minor suite also has two Bourrées, the second in A major. The G minor suite contains Gavottes, the second being in G major, whereas the fourth suite has Minuets, the second written in D minor. The fifth suite has Passepièds, the second in E major; the D minor suite contains Gavottes again, the second in D major.

The six Partitas are the only suites along with the Overture in the French Manner that Bach named and published during his lifetime. Published in 1731 in the "Clavierübung," the Partitas are the most difficult technically of the three collections of suites. Each suite has an introductory movement, every one of which is different in name and in form. Each of these sets the mood for its particular suite.

The first Partita in B-flat major begins with a Prelude which is fugue-like. Optional dances are two Minuets, the second of which complies with the traditional eight-measure, two phrases requirement. The Gigue in this Partita is unusual in that it involves much hand-crossing.

The second Partita in C minor opens with a Sinfonia in which there is a slow, heavy introduction, an Andante section, and finally a fugue in 3-4 time. This suite does not end with a Gigue, but with the Capriccio mentioned previously. Before the Capriccio is the Rondeau. The Capriccio contains much imitation and contrapuntal passagework. It is in the usual binary form.

The A minor Partita begins with a Fantasia. This piece is very similar to Bach's Two-Part Inventions, only this is more elaborate. That this movement sets the tone for the others in the suite is quite evident

in this example. The Allemande is more richly ornamented in this suite and moves quite freely. The Corrente is very quick and free, too, as if reminiscent of a fantasy. Even the usually sedate Sarabande has its share of melodic ornamentation. The two optional dances included in this suite represent well its fantasy-like quality. They are the Burlesca—a musical jest, and the Scherzo—a piece in light-hearted style. These are the two examples that are not dance forms, but which are compositions of the mind just as fantasies are formed in the mind.

The fourth Partita which is in D major is begun with an Overture in the French style. Therefore, it has dotted rhythms, and a slow and fast section. The Allemande and Courante show evidence of the dotted rhythms and of the serious nature of the Overture. An Aria is included before the Sarabande here, again indicating that this Partita is a more serious work. The graceful Minuet is also included, this time without a Trio.

The Partita No. V in G major opens with a Preambulum. This introductory piece is a very free sort of two-part invention with broken chords and passagework interspersed so that there is a mixture of ideas. One of the optional dances in this suite is marked "Tempo di Minuetta." It is in 3-4 time, but Bach has misplaced the accents consistently so that there is a hemiola effect between two and three throughout. Also included is a Passepied.

The last Partita in E minor begins with a Toccata. Its fugue is prefaced and succeeded by passages of broken chords and scales. Therefore, this Partita is also of a serious nature. It, too, has an Air preceding the Sarabande. The only other optional dance is marked "Tempo di Gavotta." Other than the reference to the dance, the piece has little in common with the Gavotte. It is full of contrapuntal lines

and continuous motion. However, it does begin on the third beat of a measure of four beats as the Gavotte does. Correntes are included in the first, third, fifth, and sixth Partitas, and Courantes in the second and fourth.

The thirteenth suite Bach wrote, entitled "Overture in the French Manner," is in B minor. This suite was written to adapt the instrumental suite to keyboard. Because instrumental suites were not restricted to any particular kind of dances or to the order in which they were arranged, this suite is not in the traditional form. It begins with an Overture which is indeed in the French style. Therefore, it has an opening slow section, a fast section, and a return to the slow section. It has the characteristic dotted rhythms. The Allemande is omitted altogether. The Courante employs dotted rhythms, too. After the Courante are two Gavottes, the second serving as a Trio. It is in the relative major key, D major. Next are two Passepièds, with the second in the parallel major, B major, and again serving as a Trio. Note that these four dances are included before the Sarabande.

Two Bourrées follow the Sarabande. The second one serves as a Trio. However, to retain interest, this Trio remains in B minor. A Gigue follows the Bourrées, and an Echo follows the Gigue. The Echo movement has been marked "piano" and "forte" for two dynamic levels on two harpsichord manuals, thus creating an echo-like effect.

In conclusion, much individual variety and interest can be found in the suites of J.S. Bach, because he expanded the form to its finest capabilities.

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